

Using Foundation Program Academic Standards as a Quality Enhancement Tool

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Abstract

The vast majority of students entering into higher education in the Sultanate of Oman are first required to undergo a general foundation program. Until recently, these programs had been outside the purview of any external quality assurance system. Over 2006-7, the Oman Accreditation Council led the establishment of academic standards for accrediting these programs. This is the first time in Oman that explicit national standards focused on student learning outcomes have been introduced. At the most simplistic level, academic standards can be used for regulatory purposes and provide guidance for curriculum development. However, the experiences of Oman have revealed a far more pervasive quality enhancement function for academic standards that has profound implications to be addressed at both the sectoral and institutional levels. This paper explores this quality enhancement function in detail and outlines some of the consequential quality enhancement activities taking place in Oman.

Introduction

Academic standards are commonly used within quality assurance processes to differentiate the status of programs, e.g. licensed or accredited. These differentials can have profound consequences, such as eligibility for public funding, recognition for credit transfer purposes, or even permission to operate. However, the role of standards in higher education is not merely regulatory. Standards also play a significant role in driving the quality of education forward. This is widely understood in terms of their ability to catalyse – or even coerce – improvements in curricula. However, the potential breadth and depth of quality enhancements brought about through the application of standards can be far more extensive than just curriculum changes.

Over the past couple of years, the Sultanate of Oman has developed and introduced an inaugural set of academic standards for general foundation programs (GFPs). This paper chronicles the key developmental and implementation stages and then discusses some of the broader quality enhancement issues for the sector that have arisen as a consequence of these standards.

Program Accreditation/Recognition in Oman

Before discussing the particular case of GFP standards, it is necessary to outline the system of accreditation/recognition for programs in Oman. Programs recognised by the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF), namely post secondary diplomas and degrees, must be licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) prior to the first intake of enrolments. The Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) has been established, *inter alia*, to accredit (or *recognise* – see below) licensed programs against academic standards once, at least, a first cohort of students has graduated.

The development of academic standards for all applicable fields of study, as set out in the Oman Standard Classification of Education (OAC, 2009), is a lengthy process even when based on international benchmarks. The OAC is in the early stages of this journey. It has commenced by developing a template for ensuring such standards are crafted to focus primarily on student learning outcomes, although it also considers alignment with the OQF, program-specific resources and a number of other factors. The template requires that student learning outcome standards are structured according to a revised formulation of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956).

Many of the higher education opportunities in Oman are provided through private institutions (23 at the time of writing) that have affiliations with overseas universities. The primary purpose of these affiliations is to access quality-assured academic programs suitable for importing into Oman. As such, the majority of higher education academic programs offered by private HEIs in Oman are foreign and are awarded by overseas institutions rather than Omani institutions. These programs are not subject to accreditation by the OAC, but rather to a process of recognition (also by the OAC) of their original accredited status and the appropriateness of transnational quality assurance systems in place to assure the maintenance of their quality.

In addition to program accreditation/recognition, all licensed higher education institutions (HEIs), public and private, undergo institutional accreditation. This involves a two stage process of quality audit followed, after four years or so, by assessment against prescribed institutional standards. As shall be shown by examples later, the institutional and program quality assurance processes, while separate, are intimately linked and designed to be mutually supportive in the interests of encouraging good education practices.

General Foundation Programs

In the context of Oman, a GFP is regarded as a non-credit program designed to academically prepare a student for their post secondary studies. This is different from another common usage of the term *foundation* referring to a credit-bearing first year of a degree program that comprises core subjects designed to provide a basis for the rest of the program (these are sometimes called *specialised foundation programs*). It is also not helpful to think of a

foundation program in Oman as a *bridging course*, as that term can sometimes suggest a program designed to provide educational opportunities that were missing between the exit standards of secondary education and the entry standards of post secondary education (e.g. for mature students who wish to undertake post secondary studies but may not have completed secondary schooling). A GFP is not intended to address structural gaps in the overall education system, but rather to provide additional assistance for those students who have had exposure to the required academic standards but have not yet succeeded in meeting them. Ideally, attainment of secondary exit standards ought to enable the student to enter directly into their post secondary studies.

That said, the vast majority of HEIs in both the public and private sectors have found it necessary to provide some form of foundation program – even Sultan Qaboos University which, as the premier institution, attracts the most capable students. In fact, about 88% of all students seeking to undertake their first diploma or degree program in Oman are assessed by their HEI as first needing to complete some form of foundation program (Carroll, 2007). This is a staggeringly high number that suggests the challenges facing the sector are systemic. Clearly, strategies at all levels of education provision will be required in order to maximise the potential for the population to fully benefit from higher education. As such, this paper does not suggest that the introduction of GFPs will, of itself, achieve this goal. Nonetheless, the scale and necessity of foundation programs demand attention.

It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that prior to the introduction of standards there had been no external means for determining whether or not the range of foundation programs being offered by HEIs were effective in preparing students for their post secondary studies. These foundation programs were subject to neither licensure by the MoHE nor accreditation by the OAC. As is commonly the case internationally, foundation programs had fallen through cracks in the regulatory system, being neither secondary education nor higher education.

While there was no applicable external quality assurance system, there was a degree of commonality between the foundation programs – at least structurally. Until the introduction of the standards, foundation programs in the majority of HEIs were focused predominantly on English language competency. Primary and secondary education in Oman has been taught mainly in Arabic. Post secondary education, however, is taught mainly in English. This is, in part, a consequence of the country's reliance over the past decade on programs imported from English-speaking countries (and, in part, a deliberate strategy to prepare students to be effective in an increasingly globalised world). As a consequence, English language proficiency emerged as the most apparent challenge for students wishing to progress to post secondary studies. This was addressed in foundation programs at the expense of maintaining a balanced education or of addressing other potential academic preparatory requirements.

Another important feature that traditional foundation programs had in common was their duration. They were typically framed within a single academic year, irrespective of the scale of the academic skills deficit of each individual student. Hence a traditional foundation program was often called a *foundation year*.

Developing GFP Standards

The significance of foundation programs in the overall education system is simply too important to ignore. There are many stakeholders with an interest in whether or not foundation programs are effective. Students wish to complete their post secondary studies as

quickly as possible; Government and parents wish to ensure money is well spent; academicians wish to have students who are well prepared for their post secondary studies.

The need for clear standards was identified by the sector itself. In 2005, three conferences were held to develop standards. The first, held at Sultan Qaboos University in May 2005, recommended the establishment of broad standards and quality assurance measures to guide foundation programs. The second was held by the Ministry of Higher Education's then-Colleges of Education in September and resulted in the publication of a first set of academic standards – in English and computer skills – for foundation programs. These standards held no formal status within the national quality assurance system, but did provide an important first step towards the establishment of a comprehensive set of standards for accreditation purposes. A third conference, called “Bridging the Gap”, was conducted between the Ministry of Education and SQU, focusing on higher education entrance standards. Together, these three initiatives created the momentum necessary for a coordinated attempt at developing national standards.

In 2006, the OAC led a project to establish internationally benchmarked academic standards for “General Foundation Programs” (GFP). The term “general” indicates that the program is generic preparation for all post secondary studies and can be augmented as necessary for the particular requirements of a subsequent program of study. GFP standards apply nationally, but are set at the level of generic learning outcomes, thereby allowing each HEI to develop their own curriculum.

The OAC's template for academic standards was applied. However, only the cognitive domain was considered, as the affective and psychomotive (Dave, 1975) domains were not regarded as essential for a GFP.

The GFP standards focused on four subject areas: English language; mathematics; computing skills and information technology; and general academic study skills. These areas were chosen as a result of discussions with the sector in Oman and a review of international literature, such as the Report of the UK's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997).

The project involved one working group for each of these four subject areas. Each group consisted of senior academicians from Oman and at least one prominent international academician. They conducted international benchmarking with standards developed by agencies such as the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), USA (2006) and, incorporating their own knowledge and experience, developed draft sets of standards appropriate for Oman. These drafts were then discussed at a national two-day symposium in January 2007, and in post-symposium online discussion boards¹.

The final version was approved by the Council of Higher Education and issued as national standards by way of a Ministerial Decision². All public and private HEIs are expected to have adopted these standards by the 2009/2010 academic year, at which time the OAC will commence accreditation of GFPs (which, for the time being, will be voluntary).

¹ The OAC has a website dedicated to discussion of draft standards. See <http://www.oac.gov.om/qa/prog/dev/>, last accessed 26 February 2007.

² Minister of Higher Education Decision No.72/2008. Sultanate of Oman.

Quality Enhancement Issues

The GFP symposium brought nearly eight months of national consultation to a successful and positive conclusion. This was not Oman's first attempt at developing foundation program standards. However, it was the first time that a clear government mandate, supported by the Minister of Higher Education, existed to implement the standards. This provided political legitimacy to the project. Also, it was the most comprehensive, benchmarked and inclusive approach to date. Therefore, the symposium was an intense event which garnered considerable enthusiasm and commitment.

However, a powerful question from a delegate permeated the euphoria of the closing plenary session: "What do we do now?"

This question was interesting for several reasons. It highlighted that the process of standards development and the process of standards implementation need to be considered concurrently, lest the former fail to ensure the latter. Also, and in light of the discussion that ensued, it illustrated that dedicated participation in the development of standards does not necessarily indicate the presence of the competencies necessary to implement the standards.

The approval of standards, whilst an important milestone, is only the end of the beginning. As Scott says: "expecting people new to a change to quickly grasp what its proponent may have spent months thinking through is unfair" (Scott, 1999, p.198).

And so, attention turned to the broader issues that need to be considered when introducing standards – particularly a sector's inaugural set of standards. Each one represents a significant quality enhancement opportunity. These include, and are not limited to, the following.

Embracing the consequences of transparent student learning outcomes

The international trend towards assessment of student learning outcomes is difficult, intimately revealing, and the basis for competition (Hernon et al, 2006). The difficulties are multidimensional. For example, they involve explicit recognition of a number of gaps. Firstly, there is the difference between international and local standards for entry into post secondary programs. In Oman this is very transparent because of the large number of foreign programs – and hence foreign entrance standards – offered through the private universities and colleges. Lowering the entrance standards for post secondary education is therefore not an option (and is, in any event, a Faustian bargain). However, there may be scope to negotiate standards for imported programs provided that the consequences for mutual recognition of degree programs are explicitly factored into these negotiations.

Perhaps the more difficult difference to acknowledge is that between the caliber of school leavers and the required post secondary entrance standards. The large number of students undertaking foundation programs is solid evidence of this gap. Such recognition requires collaborative attention of the secondary and post secondary sectors and will necessitate shared consideration of standards and assessment methods in both sectors.

Differentiating between the quantity and quality of student learning

There is a challenge to reconcile the quantity of time studying and the quality of learning achieved. In many cases, traditional approaches to foundation learning commodified the foundation program curriculum into a one-size-fits-all academic year (the *foundation year*). This was based primarily upon the quantum of study funded by the Government. A student either had to undertake the year or not. But given that students arrive at HEIs with widely varying capabilities, this approach was manifestly more concerned with administrative convenience than student-centredness.

The GFP standards are designed to discriminate according to each student's learning needs, in that students are assessed according to their level of achievement in the four subject areas and are only expected to undertake as much study as is necessary to achieve the requisite learning outcomes. This, in turn, requires HEIs to develop more flexible approaches to structuring their GFPs. At the national level, it may also have implications for the method by which Government allocates public funding to students undertaking GFPs. In order for appropriate changes in public policy to be determined, accurate information will be required about the changes in student study patterns brought about by this greater level of discrimination in student performance.

This information, while perhaps developed initially to inform funding decisions, has the potential to engender a new and deeper understanding of levels of student learning; student progression; and organizational teaching effectiveness.

Developing a deeper understanding of student-centred curriculum planning

As has been mentioned, traditional foundation programs had typically focused on one year of English language. This was at the expense of broader academic preparation based on each student's learning needs. At the systematic level, this revealed a lack of depth in curriculum planning by HEIs and inadequate communication between the secondary and post secondary sectors regarding academic standards.

Awareness of these issues existed prior to the establishment of the standards, but had not been incorporated into the education structures and systems. Extensive consultations with providers in the post secondary sector revealed profound concerns about the mathematical and general academic skills of school leavers.

The inclusion of mathematics, computing and general study skills in the GFP standards is requiring a radical reorganization of the GFPs within many HEIs. This, in turn, is bringing curriculum planning into sharp focus as an opportunity for improvement. While the catalyst for this may be GFP standards, the implications are far broader. Correspondingly, issues of student learning objectives, curriculum design, corresponding assessment methods etc. are topics within the scope of institutional quality audits in Oman (OAC, 2008, pp.20-21).

Embracing the professionalisation of teaching in higher education

The strategies used to develop standards are not the same as those used to implement them. Whereas the development of standards involves the best available expertise in each subject, the implementation of standards involves all academicians involved in the teaching of GFPs.

Working with explicit academic standards for student learning outcomes requires a heightened praxis by teachers, because turning standards into practice is complex. It involves designing curriculum and employing teaching methods that will assist the student in achieving certain learning outcomes that extend significantly beyond information recall; and developing and implementing corresponding assessment schemes.

These challenges, in turn, shine a light on the caliber of academicians and the adequacy of professional development opportunities for those staff. This is a particularly important issue in a country which relies heavily on foreign academicians employed on fixed term contracts. The Omani higher education sector – particularly the private sector – is characterized by a large proportion of faculty recruited internationally. For the most part, these academicians are recruited on contracts of one or two years (often renewable). They are expected to arrive in the country work-ready and, as such, do not necessarily have access to professional development opportunities. In the private HEIs, and even some of the public HEIs, academicians are tasked with teaching curriculum provided by the affiliate institutions. As such, many academicians have little or no experience in curriculum development. This will limit the capability of HEIs to prepare for accreditation of their programs.

The introduction of standards, and all that they entail, will require a reconsideration of this approach – particularly in respect of professional development opportunities. This is a topic within the scope of institutional quality audits in Oman (OAC, 2008, p.30). To some HEIs this appeared at first to be a political issue potentially in conflict with the prioritization of resources for professional development in accordance with human resource nationalization goals. However, the implications of having programs accredited against standards is bringing about a deeper awareness of the need for all faculty to develop skills in new pedagogies and curriculum development.

Conclusions

The introduction of GFP academic standards in Oman has highlighted a number of quality enhancement opportunities that are shared throughout the nation and that extend far beyond merely modifying curricula. Perhaps the most obvious ongoing challenge is the maintenance of momentum for these enhancements. Given that GFP accreditation will be voluntary, it cannot be assured that this activity will, on its own, generate and maintain progress. Rather, the responsibility for momentum must remain with academicians themselves. In part, this will be sustained through an increased emphasis on the professionalisation of teaching. However, professional development in the form of formal programs will not always be affordable nor available – nor even the most appropriate tool. It is also important to identify “fellow travellers” (Scott, 1999, p.135) and network with them to share experiences and ideas. To that end, the Oman Quality Network (www.oac.gov.om/oqn/), an informal network of the HEIs themselves, provides an excellent forum for exploring strategies for working with academic standards.

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